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Stretching, Switching and Blending Frames: Sensemaking in and around Organizations

Inaugural address of prof.dr. J.P. Cornelissen, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration VU University Amsterdam, 11 november 2011

Mijnheer de rector, dames en heren,

Toen ik 18 was en net van het gymnasium kwam stond ik met mijn vader voor een redelijk aftands gebouw vlak bij Station Hoog Catherijne in Utrecht. We waren daar voor een voorlichtingsdag van de Hogeschool voor een bachelor opleiding in communicatie. Ik was eerder zelf al wezen kijken bij de Universiteit van Amsterdam, maar wist toen niet zeker of communicatie wetenschappen wel echt een studie voor mij was. Het leek nogal abstract en voornamelijk gebaseerd op theorie en kritiek met betrekking tot communicatie en media op maatschappelijk niveau. Iets minder abstract en ook met een oog naar de praktijk leek me echter wel wat. Ik hoopte dus ook op een goedkeurend woord van mijn vader. In tegenstelling mompelde hij wat, en vroeg ik nog een keer wat hij zei voordat we naar binnen liepen. Gebakken lucht, herhaalde hij, communicatie is toch allemaal gebakken lucht. Het druiste tegen zijn eigen idee in van een tastbaar beroep en vakmanschap, en was meer iets van de nieuwe generatie. Een hoop drukdoenerij zonder dat het wat oplevert. Die opmerking ging eigenlijk nu pas weer bij het voorbereiden van deze rede door mijn hoofd, dus ik heb er in die tijd niet echt lang bij stilgestaan. Maar het schetst ook wel een goede inleiding voor waar ik het over wil hebben; namelijk dat communicatie in en rond organisaties soms meer of minder symbolisch of zelfs volledig fictief kan zijn, maar wel degelijk een effect heeft, op bijvoorbeeld het ontwerp van organisaties of het succesvol opzetten van nieuwe ondernemingen. Al dit kan eigenlijk niet zonder een gezonde dosis van gebakken lucht.

Introduction

Everyone has a theory of organizing and organizations. Everyone is in some way connected to organizations in modern day society, and that means that we all have theories about what organizations are and what makes them tick. A tacit theory of corporate organizations - that corporations are accountable to shareholders – is for example embedded in the very fabric of capitalism. Many people have challenged this particular theory by questioning the limited liability of managers in corporate organizations and by trying to broaden the focus of corporations towards the benefit of other stakeholders such as employees and members of local communities. We absorb still other ideas from our intellectual climate to change our views of organizations: ideas that we obtain from the expertise of authorities and the conventional wisdom of the day.

Our own individual theory of organization is the wellspring of much in our lives. Working in organizations we consult it when we want to persuade or inform others or when we need to decide on a particular course of action. Studying organizations, it advises us on how work is performed, what responsibilities organizations have and what we can expect of them, and how we can best control our own behaviour when we deal with organizations. And because it delineates what falls within the remit and control of organizations, it affects our values: what we believe we can reasonably expect from organizations as stakeholders or members of society. Rival theories of organization exist and are based on very different images of what organizations are and how they accomplish their goals.

A theory of organizations, as of any other subject, involves a system of ideas and principles that explains what an organization is and how it operates. A theory is not simply about observations or facts. It is not just about the physical buildings, materials, products and people associated with a particular organization, but it is about the construal of those observations or facts: how the intricate and complex swirl of activities, resources, people and events that we understand as an organization can be conceptualized and understood by human minds. A feature of theories that I have repeatedly encountered through my research is that organizations are typically understood in terms of concrete images, or frames, that connect ideas and principles and often in terms of concrete scenarios across space and time (e.g., Cornelissen, 2005; Cornelissen & Durand, 2012).

Consider for example how human minds conceptualize organizations and theorize about them. A classic but still widespread theory of organizations is based upon an image of organization as if they are machines which are efficiently designed to produce certain outputs and meet pre-defined targets. This particular image goes back to Frederick Winslow Taylor's formulation of industrial bureaucracy in the early 1900s, better known as scientific management, which involved a mixture of ideas and principles from mechanical engineering and "social physics" (Guillen, 1997). The assumption underlying this image was that productivity could be enhanced by specifying cause and effect in the production process, similar

to the controlled mechanics of a machine. Hence, managers are charged with designing and planning work similar to how an engineer designs a machine, leaving the workers with the task of implementation. Workers in turn can be characterized in purely physical terms as cogs in a machine or as units of energy (Taylor measured workers in “foot-pounds of energy”) and on that basis can be selected for their mechanical fit with a particular pre-specified task.

This particular image laid the foundation for many of the technical approaches to understanding and managing organizations (e.g., control systems, cost savings, “human resources” management) that are still with us today. One of the most recent examples involves the “reengineering” movement that swept across North America and much of Europe in the 1990s. Throughout the 1980s, many large firms had grown through a strategy of acquiring firms and diversifying into new industries. This resulted in large and unwieldy enterprises that proved to be financially unsustainable and it was therefore suggested that these organizations needed to be “reengineered” around a more limited and core set of businesses and activities (Davis et al., 1994). The objective of “reengineering” was to “downsize” these large conglomerate firms by divesting unrelated businesses and by “restructuring” the organization around a much more focused set of activities in a related set of markets or industries. Staying true to the image of an organization as a machine, organizations had to be redesigned around one or a few production processes and with an efficient use of human “resources” in mind. Promoted by leading management consultancies such as McKinsey, Bain and the Boston Consulting Group, the implementation of these reengineering principles led to “leaner” and more efficient organizations but also caused unprecedented levels of redundancies and worker unrest in the 1990s.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this particular theory of organizations and the machine image that underlies it has been much criticized. It can indeed be upsetting to think of workers as glorified gears and springs. Machines are insensate, built to be used, and disposable; whereas human workers are sentient and possess dignity and rights. A machine has some workaday purpose such as grinding grain and is fully mechanized. We typically think of human workers as having higher purposes such as gaining enjoyment and fulfilment from work. Workers also have human-like abilities such as creativity, volition and entrepreneurship which are not accounted for in the standardized and fully controlled routines of a machine.

An image that has been proposed as an alternative to the machine is to conceptualize an organization as communities or networks of individuals that are tied through social connections instead of through hierarchical relationships. Another rival image that has been cast is to think of organizations as patterns of inter-locking actions that have become routine and institutionalized over time. Through repeated usage, actions come to be understood and treated as natural which ensures that employees will perform them in roughly the same way at each point in time. The alternative image, then, is to think of actions as being performed or enacted in line with conventionalized or institutionalized expectations and understandings instead of thinking of them as being mindlessly executed as technical operations in a machine.

Organizations and Organization Theory

The fact that rival construals of the same phenomenon (organizations) are possible tells us that the nature of reality does not dictate the way that reality is represented in people's minds and articulated to one another. The language of thought allows us to frame the same phenomenon in different, at times incompatible ways. An organization can be framed and thought of as a machine, network or social structure depending on how we mentally imagine it for ourselves, which in turn depends on what we choose to focus on and what we choose to ignore (Cornelissen, 2005). The way in which we frame an organization in alternative ways leads to alternative decisions and courses of action with direct consequences for ourselves as well as for the economy and society at large.

Alternative frames also reveal different ideological positions on how organizations can best accomplish their ends and on how workers and employees, based on their abilities and motivations, should be controlled. Often, alternative ways of framing an organization are pitted against each other, and the disputants struggle to show that their framing is more apt. Since the 1990s, for example, intellectuals and academics have argued for replacing stale mechanistic images of organizations and of the economy at large with the metaphor of distributed intelligence, anticipating the move towards network organizations and developments such as open innovation and crowd sourcing. The pitting of different images against each other highlights another curious fact about framing and the language of thought. In puzzling about how to account for the organizations of today, we draw upon ideas and vocabularies from different domains in society and mobilize the ideas of our time. The factory image that was mentioned emerged out of the industrial revolution, a time in which engineers like assisted organizations with the standardization and mechanization of production processes. Nowadays, we have network images of distributed intelligence drawn from ideas in computer science and the cognitive and brain sciences.

At this point, one may wonder why it matters that people in general produce these images as rival accounts or fully-fledged theories of organizations. One may feel that it is a matter of mere "semantics", with its implication of splitting hairs and debates associated with the ivory tower of academics and universities. But I hope to show in the following half an hour that how people understand the world of organizations, and hence semantics, is not only a matter of intellectual fascination but also of real-world importance. Though "importance" is often hard to quantify, an early example may put a value on it. What exactly is an organization and why does it matter? Corporations, as one type of organization, are granted legal rights as if they were individual "persons", a legal status that allows managers of those corporations to operate with limited personal liability. This legal certification of corporations means that by law managers have to focus on delivering profits and returns for the corporation's shareholders (Cornelissen, 2011). That also means that these corporations are formally required to put the interests of their shareholders ahead of those of their other stakeholders such as their employees or members of the local

communities in which they operate. It also implies that on occasion corporations have been found to “externalize” costs such as the dumping of their toxic waste in order to enhance profits, a feat that is possible because of the limited personal liability of managers (Bakan, 2004). Corporations, as already mentioned, grew in the 1980s by a conscious strategy of “portfolio planning”, a process by which corporations acquired other companies and made investments in a range of markets and industries based on the idea of a corporation as an investment vehicle. Just as an individual may hold shares in different enterprises, the idea was that a corporation could similarly be seen as a bundle of investments set out against the growth potential and odds of different markets. However, when by the early 1990s portfolio planning did not lead to the promised returns and made corporations grow unmanageably large, consultants stepped in with yet another definition of the corporation based on the image of an organization as a machine. Corporations had to be “reengineered” around core production processes with everything else divested or outsourced. Business units of corporations changed hands and many employees lost their jobs as a result of this downsizing trend. The 1990s also saw yet another image of corporations take hold: that of corporations as responsible “corporate citizens”. The extreme focus on the bottom-line and shareholder concerns came under pressure from governments and publics across the globe who felt that corporations needed to start acting as ethically minded citizens who try to curb their impact on the environment and look after the well-being of all their stakeholders and not just their shareholders. Many corporations have since followed suit and have developed elaborate corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to demonstrate their social and environmental credentials. What this quick tour through definitions and images of the corporation shows is that there is nothing “mere” about semantics: the words and thoughts that we use to describe organizations have real-world consequences for shareholders, stakeholders, managers and employees as well as financial markets, and the economy and society at large.

Language, Frames and the Reality of Organizations

Semantics is about how we use words such as “reengineering” or “corporate citizen” to conceptualize organizations and to think about them. It is about the relation of language to reality – the way in which managers, employees, consultants, politicians and everyone else commit to a shared understanding of what organizations are, and the way their thoughts are anchored to developments and situations in the world. It is also about the relation of words to a community – how words when they are introduced come to evoke the same idea in an entire community, so that people can understand one another when they use it. Words and the language that we use to define organizations evoke images of what we believe organizations are or should be. In turn, the language that academics, managers and consultants use is an important medium by which they express their thoughts about organizations. The use of words and language, in other words, allows us a window into their ideas about organizations. An important point here, as I have already tried to suggest, is that virtually all images about organizations are produced by using words metaphorically, and not literally. Strictly speaking, a metaphor is a “figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable” (Oxford English Dictionary). Our words disclose conceptions of organizations *as if* they are machines, social structures, computers, or corporate citizens (Cornelissen, 2005). Organizations are of course not literally machines or citizens (at least not in how we originally understand these concepts). However, by transferring these words from their original domain to the sphere of organizations we are able to extend our thinking. Mobilizing words from other domains enables us to frame organizations in novel and multiple ways. It opens up possibilities for seeing and understanding organizations, to fix our perspective that would otherwise not be there if we would only restrict ourselves to a set of literal words. In other words, metaphors give us alternative ways of framing organizations, a feat of language and thought that explains how and why there is such wide variety and change in our thinking about organizations.

In this sense, then, using language fluidly and metaphorically is useful as a way of thinking about abstract and complex subjects such as organizations. Doing so brings complexity into the confines of a single image by drawing upon parallels between organizations and other, concrete domains of knowledge. Thus, when we liken an organization to a machine, we use our knowledge of machines to form an image of what an organization is like. The metaphor frames our understanding of the organization in a distinctive but partial way. Metaphors tend to produce partial insights because a particular image highlights certain interpretations at the expense of others. The image of an organization as a machine brings aspects of efficiency and engineering into focus but ignores the human aspects. The metaphor is thus at the same time enlightening and biased or limiting. Metaphors, as associative forms of reasoning, also aid our decision-making as tools of inference that can be carried over from a conventional to novel domain, where they can do real work (Bateson, 1972). Put differently, they can power sophisticated

inferences. When people in organization enact such inferences it may have predictable consequences that may be self-reinforcing. To demonstrate this very point, I briefly refer to a recent study with Eero Vaara and Saku Mantere; where we analysed the real-time communication processes between Metropolitan Police Officers that led to the unfortunate shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes in London in 2005. The shooting happened as part of an anti-terrorist operation set up to chase four terrorists who were still at large in the city on the 22nd of July after a failed bombing attempt. Because the bombers were still at large it was decided that a specialist firearms team would be on stand-by 24 hours a day to assist in the manhunt for these suspects. A designated senior officer (DSO), Cressida Dick, was appointed to lead the manhunt as she had been one of the first senior officers to receive training for “Kratos” situations. Kratos was, and still is, the code-word for policies and tactics that were developed for dealing with suspected terrorist suicide bombers. Operations under Kratos allow for pre-emptive police strikes before terrorist crimes and casualties can occur. Accordingly, police officers are able to fire a critical head shot to incapacitate or kill a suspected terrorist (rather than the standard practice of firing at the torso) when authorised by a senior commander and without needing to provide a verbal challenge as this would alert the suspect to the presence of the police.

The operation and the potential use of the Kratos protocol presented an unprecedented situation for Commander Dick as well as for the other surveillance and firearms officers on the ground. A critical characteristic of the operation was that it involved stressful, fast-changing circumstances. An alleged suspect could also not be approached, unless it was confirmed that he was the target, which in turn would mean that he would be preemptively shot. Any alternative actions could alert the suspect to the presence of the police, risking the detonation of a bomb. These particular conditions not only put enormous pressures on police officers to get the identification right, but arguably also necessitated a degree of flexibility in framing and real-time communication processes to allow for improvisation in context and to match a highly volatile environment that carried the potential for error (Weick et al. 1999).

At around 9:33 on the morning of the 22nd of July 2005, Jean Charles de Menezes left the communal entrance at Scotia Road, the address that Police had identified for one of the suspects. He was first seen by Frank of the red surveillance team, who was in a van parked nearby and communicated over a closed circuit radio to his team members that he was “worth a second look”. Two other officers, James and Ken, drove past him in a car, and both only saw a partial glimpse of his face. Whilst sitting in the car James took the opportunity to look at the photograph of the target for the operation and concluded that he was “possibly identical with” the suspect and was in effect “a good possible likeness”. He recorded this in his log and at 9:41, James contacted the Scotland Yard control room. Although Jean Charles de Menezes was not directly identified as the suspect, this expression suggests a large degree of overlap (“identical *with*”) between the two profiles, with this intersection possibly warranting a positive identification. A few moments later, the control room asked James to “tell them a percentage of identification”, in other words, put a percentage on how sure they were that the man they were following was the suspect. James,

however, responded that he thought it was a ridiculous question; he felt that identification was either fully positive or negative (“he is or he isn’t” as he put it), but he nonetheless asked his team over the radio. Because no one replied he took it that none could assist in a positive identification. Pat then asked James if he could say anything at all to help answer the question and to assist them in their decision-making. Pressed for an answer, James replied “for what it’s worth, I think it’s him”. Upon hearing the reply, Pat communicated to Dick and her command team “It is him, the man off [the] bus. They think it is him and he is very, very jumpy”. Besides recording the identification as fully positive, Pat’s expression suggests that the suspect was apparently rather nervous, out of control, and probably on the verge of reaching his target for the detonation of a bomb.

On the basis of this framing of the movements of Jean Charles de Menezes, Commander Dick decided to mobilize the firearms team, who in the end shoot Jean Charles de Menezes, despite the fact that he was never directly identified and was fully innocent. What does this brief episode show about language and framing in the context of organizations? First of all, it shows that when words are used in context they do not strictly determine meaning; instead, words prompt larger conceptual frames, such as that of chasing a suicide bomber, which in turn means that in ongoing speech individuals need to detect the changing background assumptions, or frames, necessary for continued interpretation (Goffman, 1974). The use of words, as acts of *framing*, are in turn often defined with respect to a background conceptual frame and performs a categorization that provides perspective and also takes the frame for granted (Fillmore, 1982). An important characteristic of frames is thus that words invoke or cue larger frames, such as that of a terrorist bomber, that impart organizing structure. Activating a frame organizes experience and creates expectations about important aspects of the context or circumstance by directing individuals to elaborate on the prototypical scenario in a manner suggested by the frame. Individuals like the firearms officers in this case use such frames to make inferences in context, to make default assumptions about unmentioned aspects of situations, and to make predictions about the consequences of their actions. When the firearms officers came face-to-face with Jean Charles de Menezes in Stockwell tube station, all they could see for example was a bulky jacket (supposedly concealing an explosive) and they also interpreted his action of standing up as a direct challenge, as if he were a terrorist bomber. While frames are resources for sensemaking, they may also entrap people and impede their ability to be mindful in real-time sensemaking contexts. Despite their advantages for meaning construction, the primary problem with frame-based systems of understanding is that they may be overly brittle (Weick 1995).

Frames, in other words, may turn out to be rigid data structures that cannot accommodate events that are out of the ordinary. Indeed, the blind commitment to a frame within organizations is an important source of failure in the context of dynamic or unprecedented circumstances that require inferential flexibility and improvised behaviors. The ability of individuals to transcend any particular frame thus appears to be crucial for individual and collective intelligence and mindfulness in context. In the case of

the shooting, there is an example of this in Ivor, a surveillance officer, who is virtually the only one in the entire operation who doubts as to whether JCM was the suspect. He saw him at the tube station collect a copy of the Metro newspaper, get a ticket from his pocket and go towards the entrance barriers to the station. Having seen this, Ivor then asked over the central radio; “Do you want him lifted?” Ivor was aware that firearms officers were mobilized and that his own role, as part of the strategy, was restricted to surveillance. The metaphorical expression he used highlights his position close to JCM and his ability to pick him up, that is, to take him out of the immediate surroundings of the underground (which were reminiscent of the attacks of the day before) and to bring an end to the pursuit. He thus shifted between the initial frame of the ongoing chase or pursuit (that Ivor would be able to “lift” him out of) with an alternative framing of a normal police operation that allowed Ivor, as a surveillance officer, to approach and detain JCM contrary to the strategy that was set for the operation. Furthermore, in the train carriage below ground, Ivor later shifted again from following standard protocol by pointing out JCM, but he then took the unprecedented step of bear hugging the suspect and pushed him back into his seat. As a surveillance officer he should have cleared the way for an armed intervention. Instead, he physically detained the suspect, as an alternative to an armed intervention, in an attempt to defuse the situation and possibly to allow more time for a positive identification. What Ivor demonstrates in this highly pressurised context is the very root of leadership and innovation in being able to doubt the present state of affairs and in envisioning an alternative frame. This may have played out in a dramatic fashion in this context, but despite the peculiarities of the case has much broader import.

Frames and Institutions

Frames thus mediate how people in organizations make sense of their actions, experiences and of their larger organizations. This is an important insight and in turn suggests that organizations themselves, as entities, consist of institutionalized frames that are routinely enacted. Within organizations, such institutionalized frames around being a surveillance officer or a firearms officer for example are defined as underlying meaning structures that organize social experience across a general strip of activity (Goffman, 1974). As naturalized and taken-for-granted structures of cultural meaning they order and stabilize interaction patterns, routines and practices within an organization and embody 'structures of expectation' that prime individuals to elaborate on the roles and behavioral scripts associated with a particular frame. These institutional frames describe classes of actors, types of situations and characteristic and routinized actions. They also mark contiguous links between the elements of a frame, such as the template of a 'role' (i.e., an actor-in-situation) and that of a 'script' (i.e., actions in particular situations). Through the institutionalized role template, for example, we can see a situation as composed of sets of actors carrying out systematic and coordinated activity through the enacting of social roles. The template provides a structured understanding and also prompts, as part of the larger frame, an associated set of legitimate scripts for a given activity (Goffman, 1974). When these scripts are in turn enacted, within the context of a work group or organization, it enables individuals to comprehend and predict the behavior of others through stereotypical inference and, as such, supports coordinated collective action if individuals commit themselves to playing out the scripted situations (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011).

The institutionalized nature of frames within organizations thus describes the enduring and sticky nature of scripts and routines and the professional role identities of actors such as surveillance officers and firearms officers. Actors have been socialized into these role identities and scripts as part of their training and induction. When they enact these scripts, as part of their routines, they will also largely do that in an automatic manner. The key point here is that, academically speaking, this explains how the making of meaning exhibits regularity, and with that, it also provides a sense of how many organizations consist of institutionalized practices, routines, rules and regulations that are the direct embodiment of background institutional frames. These frames may be updated and stretched a little in response to feedback of what works and what does not (Rerup & Feldman, 2010). However, with such stretching and updating the core of the initial frame, and any routines that flow from that, generally remains intact. Within the Kratos operation, a firearms officer was still just that: a trained professional charged with an armed intervention, whilst the script for the operation now also allowed for a pre-emptive strike without a verbal warning.

What this step-by-step updating of frames, and associated routines and practices, explains less well is processes of change, entrepreneurship and innovation, where the default frames are being challenged or

even explicitly sidestepped, as in the case of Ivor's attempt to save the life of Jean Charles de Menezes. In the words of Turner (2001: 145) classic approaches to framing and cognition have proved "nearly useless for explaining how a new schema can arise *before* it is manifest in our regular experience". What is thus needed is a fuller account of how new frames, and with that new realities, are conceptualized, come into being, and may themselves in future times become institutionalized. To answer this question I turn to my work with Jean Clarke on entrepreneurs and what makes them successful innovators. Entrepreneurs, whether they are self-employed or work for a larger organizations, provide a good case for looking at questions of change and novelty because they are often not bound in their thinking by the restrictions of given frames. Successful entrepreneurs are able to instigate and conventionalize new products and markets, potentially creating jobs and economic growth in the process.

The core of our work involved looking at video-taped interactions and presentations of successful and less successful, and serial and novice entrepreneurs. What was directly evident was that entrepreneurs seemed to vary significantly in how they framed the innovations that they had been working on and how they were able to communicate this to stakeholders to get their buy-in and support. Some clearly engaged in counter-factual reasoning to mark the difference from established practices and products in their targeted industries. Others drew on analogical parallels with established practices elsewhere in other industries to claim currency for their ideas and to gain legitimacy and support from investors. In turn, this led us to formulate a theory of entrepreneurship (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Clarke & Cornelissen, 2011) where we conceptualize the creation of new ventures as a process by which entrepreneurs come to imagine the opportunity for novel ventures, refine their ideas, and, after an initial investment, justify their ventures to relevant others to gain much-needed support and legitimacy. The guiding question for our research was how do entrepreneurs come to create and justify new ventures in such a way that they acquire institutional legitimacy and the necessary resources for venture growth? Given that initially at least entrepreneurs only have visions or beguiling fictions, with no track record or performance often yet achieved for their ventures, this seemed an apt way of capturing a core aspect of entrepreneurship. Past research has also not fully addressed this question, with most accounts theoretically or empirically equating the process with antecedent cognitive scripts or psychological traits of entrepreneurs or focusing on structural or performance outcomes and the achievement of legitimacy in an industry. Equating entrepreneurship with such antecedents or outcomes overemphasizes either the individual and his or her present cognitive state or the configuration of the social context and institutional outcomes, at the expense of what we argue is needed in the form of a more integrative understanding of the process of how entrepreneurs come up with new ideas, and, through communicating with others, find support for them. Specifically, we argued quite radically that ideas do not suddenly pop fully formed into an entrepreneur's head, but emerge from processes of communication with others, whether those others are initially close friends and family or even later on business contacts and investors. We also argued that, whilst communicating, entrepreneurs create new frames that are connected towards business opportunities for

their ventures and that often follow from analogical or metaphorical forms of speaking and thinking where ideas from other domains are transplanted to the venture and industry in question.

A good and high-profile example of this process is the late Steve Jobs, who has always talked about how dropping out of college had served him well as it had allowed him to follow courses that he found intrinsically interesting. He followed courses on Buddhism and calligraphy for example. The insights and experiences from these courses, he later claimed, informed his thinking about the design of the Mac computer. The importance of calm, for example, featured in his efforts to design computers without a noisy fan, and the deep insights that he got from the calligraphy course informed how he wanted the Apple user interface to be designed. He thus metaphorically fused insights from other cultural domains of experience into the development of technology, a feat that he repeated later on with the Ipod, Iphone and Ipad. In doing so he conceptually blended ideas from other fields with technology, in effect creating a whole new set of industries in the process and moving into territories such as music where previously Apple had not had a presence. He thus clearly broke with the institutionalized distinctions between the computing, media and music industries.

Concluding Comments and Future Plans

So far, we have seen that whilst frames are resources for sensemaking, they may also entrap individuals and impede their ability to be mindful in real-time sensemaking contexts, as was the case for the majority of police officers involved in the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes. In fact, whilst frames have some adaptability in context, their inferential capacity is based on knowledge represented in the frame itself, and frames are therefore by their very nature limiting. I have also argued that frames fundamentally mediate understanding and form the bedrock of institutions in the form of common routines or practices. Taking this one step further, a key question, as I have tried to argue, is to understand the ability of individuals, whether they are leaders, entrepreneurs or front-line staff, to transcend any particular frame which is crucial for individual and collective intelligence, learning, innovation and entrepreneurship. In this lecture, drawing on some of my past research, I have hinted at the role of analogies and metaphors in breaking away from existing frames and envisioning alternative realities. This ability to doubt or question the current status quo and to see alternatives (Bateson, 1972; Goodman, 1978) is not just a semantic quibble, as it is tied into matters of life and death in the case of Jean Charles de Menezes, as well as the creation of new products and markets for many entrepreneurs. I have highlighted processes of frame-shifting around the case of Ivor, which basically involves individuals querying the initial frame that exists or has been built up and mobilizing an alternative frame from background knowledge to structure expectations and to make inferences. I have also briefly mentioned processes of frame blending, which as in the case of Steve Jobs, involves the combination of multiple frames, rather than shifting from one to another (Turner, 2001). The result is a hybrid or a fusion of elements from different frames, with the advantage of such blends being that it often leads to emerging inferences and insights – for example, in terms of radically new markets and industries.

In terms of future plans, there is obviously much ground to cover. The basic theoretical mechanisms around framing and instances of reframing through frame shifting and frame blending are taking shape, and can form the centre of more detailed studies in the context of organizations, institutions and entrepreneurship. Much of this work will hopefully extend the research already done with colleagues in different empirical contexts. I hope to continue the work on framing and coordination in action within both conventional organizational settings as well as so-called high reliability organizations. Similarly, the work on entrepreneurship offers real opportunities to extend the initial research through continuing to work with colleagues at Leeds and VU University. I hope in particular to refine our understanding of how material resources and circumstances may interact with the conceptual processes of framing on the part of entrepreneurs, an interest shared by colleagues in cognitive linguistics and communication studies at VU University. Together with colleagues in my own department of Management and Organization, a direct aim will be to elaborate and refine the theoretical framework sketched by Jean Clarke and I and to blend it

with alternative psychological and sociological lenses so as to potentially improve its explanatory power. One promising avenue here will be to connect the framework with research on networks, which is firmly established at VU University including work on entrepreneurship (Stam & Elfring, 2008). Besides its riches, network analysis typically presents changing social configurations with observed variance in clusters and ties, but it does not as such present direct explanations on how individual entrepreneurs forge, manipulate or exploit their social networks. Combining methods with a focus on framing and communication may bring benefits, in terms of understanding the formative processes in the configuration and establishment of network ties as well as in reaping the benefits of such ties. In short, we are starting to see the beginnings of a new theory, or set of theoretical mechanisms, to understand organizations, institutions and entrepreneurship. In this lecture, I have casually walked through different contexts and domains, but throughout a core interest remains: understanding how, in and through communication, people within and around organizations create individual and joint understanding about organizations, in terms of what they are, how they function, and what to make of specific events such as strategic changes or innovations associated with those organizations (Cooren et al., 2011). This, I believe, is a fundamental set of questions, that if we get closer to answering them will have a profound and significant impact on organizations, as the dominant institutions of our time. My purpose today has been to demonstrate the importance of this project and the potential impact on practice.

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